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DONALD RICHIE

The Later Films of Yasujiro Ozu

The Japanese—film critic and paying customer alike—think Yasujiro Ozu the most Japanese of all directors. This does not mean that he is their favorite, though he has been given more official honor than any other; it means that he is regarded as a kind of spokesman; the man-on-the-street will tell you that “he has the real Japanese flavor.”

This “Japanese flavor” has a much more definite meaning than say “the American way” or “the French touch” if only because Japan is so intensely conscious of its own Japaneseness. Modern civilization is only one hundred years old and serves as a mere veneer over a civilization which has endured for two millenniums.

This has created the familiar contrasts of the country, has given the Japanese his often near-schizoid intensity, and has made him extremely conscious of his differences from the Westerner. These—after a certain period of exploration—he tends to guard. The careers of many men of letters, and some not so lettered—politicians, for example—show the familiar pattern of the parabola: a period of early exploration among things Western followed by a slow and gradual return to things purely Japanese.

The career of Ozu has followed this pattern, and indeed this pattern is one of the things celebrated in the Ozu film; its tension is obtained by the confrontation of various individuals who are in different sections of the pattern: by confronting, for example, a father who has “returned” with his daughter who is just on her “way out.” And there is never much doubt as to just whom Ozu is for. It is for this reason that many of the

young dislike his work, calling him old-fashioned and reactionary. And so he would appear, since he so continually celebrates those very qualities against which young Japan is constantly in revolt: the traditional virtues of Japan.

That these virtues are mainly theoretical in no way falsifies Ozu’s position; though everyday Japan is not a country noted for restraint, simplicity, or near-Buddhist serenity, these qualities remain ideals, and Ozu’s insistence upon them and the public feeling for or against them make them more than empty hypotheses.

Take, for example, the quality of restraint. In a strictly technical sense, Ozu films are probably the most restrained now being made—the most limited, controlled, and restricted.

He uses, for example, only one kind of shot. It is always a shot taken from the level of a person seated in traditional fashion on *tatami*. Whether indoors or out, the Ozu camera is always about three feet from floor level, and the camera almost never moves. There are no pan shots and, except in the rarest of instances, no dollies.

This traditional view is the view in repose, commanding a very limited field of vision. It is the attitude for watching, for listening, it is the position from which one sees the Noh, from which one partakes of the tea ceremony. It is the aesthetic attitude; it is the passive attitude.

It is the attitude of the *haiku* master who sits in utter silence and with an occasionally painful accuracy observes cause and effect, reaching essence through an extreme

simplification. Inextricable from Buddhist precepts, its puts the world at a distance and leaves the spectator uninvolved; a mere recorder of impressions which he may register but which do not personally involve him. Ozu's camera is Leonardo's mirror in the Orient.

Most Ozu films begin with a short sequence which introduces and reinforces this impression. *Late Spring* (Banshun, 1949) opens with a short scene inside a home in Kamakura—thirteenth-century capital of Japan and scene of the beginning of what we now know as the Japanese way. Nothing happens, no one is visible. The shadows of the bamboo move against the *shoji*; the tea kettle is boiling, the steam escaping. It is a scene of utter repose; there is no subject, no theme, unless it be the gratefulness of silence and repose. This

quality having been established, one of the characters enters and the film begins.

Empty rooms, uninhabited landscapes, objects (rocks, trees, tea kettles), textures (shadows on *shoji*, the grain of *tatami*, rain dripping), play a large part in Ozu's world, and the extreme simplicity of this view is matched by a like simplicity of construction once the film has begun.

Ozu abstentiously refrains from cinematic punctuation which many other directors would think indispensable. As early as 1930 he had begun to give up optical devices commonly thought of as being necessary. He says that his silent *Life of an Office Worker* (Kaishain Seikatsu, 1930) "was a rare film for me—I used several dissolves. But this was the only time I ever did. I wanted to get the feeling of a morning beginning. The dissolve is a handy thing, but

Ozu and his favorite camera position.





it's uninteresting. Of course, it all depends on how you use it. Most of the time it's a form of cheating." Several years later he was limiting himself even more severely, if as yet only on the technical level. In *I Was Born But . . .* (Umarete wa Mita Keredo, 1932) "for the first time, I consciously gave up the use of the fade-in and fade-out. Generally, dissolves and fades are not a part of cinematic grammar. They are only attributes of the camera."

This restriction is further reflected in Ozu's manner of setting a scene, or indicating a setting. *A Hen in the Wind* (Kaze no Naka no Mendori, 1948) is laid almost entirely in an industrial suburb. To indicate this, and to communicate the atmosphere of the locale, Ozu contents himself with a single image: a large gas tank seen from a distance; in conjunction, a river bank. These two indications are all he needs and he returns from time to time to refresh our memories.

Also he will again and again use precisely the same camera set-up to preface a sequence in series. In *Early Spring* (Soshun, 1956) scene after scene begins with early morning in the suburbs. Each of these morning scenes begins with a shot from outside the house: the early morning express visible in the distance, the neighbor's wife emptying her garbage. The same footage is not used, but the shots are so similar that the effect is the same. Ozu wanted to capture the eternal sameness of life in the city and succeeded admirably.

This abstentious rigor, this concern for brevity and economy, this aspiring to the ultimate in limitation, is also naturally reflected in Ozu's choice of story material. Except for his very early films (before he had achieved the eminence necessary for control of the content of his pictures) his

subject is always the same: it is the Japanese family.

His later and best films are about nothing else. In all these films the whole world exists in one family. The ends of the earth are no more distant than outside the house. The people are members of a family rather than members of a society, though the family may be in disruption, as in *Tokyo Story* (Tokyo Monogatari, 1953), may be nearly extinct, as in *Late Spring* or *Tokyo Twilight* (Tokyo Boshoku, 1957), or may be a kind of family substitute, the small group in a large company, as in *Early Spring*.

It is for this reason that Ozu but rarely treats romantic love. He himself has said, "I have no interest in romantic love," and has proved this statement in his films. One of his few postwar failures, *The Munekata Sisters* (Munekata Shimai, 1950), occurred when the producing company insisted upon including romantic love interest. His only real interest in the various forms of love is in those which exist between members of the family, and he is successful with romantic love only when it finds an outlet in the form of family love, as between man and wife.

As a creator of the Japanese home drama at its best, he is much more interested in the leisurely disclosure of character and incidental incident than in action or plot, and has said: "Pictures with obvious plots bore me now. Naturally, a film must have some kind of structure, or else it is not a film, but I feel that a picture isn't good if it has too much drama." Thus, in *Late Spring* the interest is in the relations between a father and daughter, and in their varying reactions to her coming marriage. In *The Flavor of Green Tea and Rice* (Ochazuke no Aji, 1952) is shown a married couple who have no children to hold them together; in at-

tempting to find a stronger basis for their marriage they find each other again. In *Tokyo Story*, Ozu examines the relations between three generations; in *Equinox Flower* (Higanbana, 1958), the effect of a broken home upon two generations.

In the 1959 *Ohayo* (Good Morning), his forty-ninth film, Ozu returned to light comedy and the world of children. Taking one of the ideas in the 1932 *I Was Born But . . .* (the two children, displeased with their father, go on a "silence" strike), Ozu created his most cheerful work, an endearing yet completely unsentimental comedy of Japanese manners.

The two little boys, angry that their father won't buy them television, refuse to answer the next door neighbor lady when she says good morning. Ordinarily, their silence would have had no meaning but, for one thing, the families are living cheek by jowl in a new housing settlement, and—for another—the neighbor lady has just had words with the little boys' mother. Eventually all the other neighbor ladies (and there are many) are involved.

The little boys (told to shut up by their father and taking it literally) refuse to

speak, even in school, but this is not their entire motivation. Earlier they had found such remarks as "good morning" and "nice weather" and "how do you do" absolutely meaningless and agreed not to use them any more. As a kind of substitute for speech there is a game (which later gets out of hand) involving breaking wind. This is the most elaborate running-gag in the film and Ozu keeps it amusing. One even finds amusing the little boy who, anxious to enter into the game, tries too hard.

Unlike *I Was Born But . . .*, however, *Ohayo* was no indictment of society; it is merely a slightly satirical diversion and, though quite amusing by itself, important mainly in that here Ozu has brought together a number of the elements which constitute his view of the world.

Despite his lack of interest in plot (and because of his interest in character) Ozu feels that the script is of the utmost importance, and it is also the single element of the film which gives him the most trouble. This accounts for his relatively small output, forty-nine pictures since 1927—his later work appearing at the rate of about one film a year.

"Write and correct, write and correct. In this way only can you make progress," he has written, adding "In making films, the most difficult job is in writing the script. It is impossible to write a script unless one knows who is going to act in it, just as a painter cannot paint if he does not know the color of his paints. Name stars have never been of special interest to me. What is important is the character of the actors. In casting it is not a matter of skillfulness or lack of skill that an actor has. It is what he is . . ."

Despite the fact that he was the last important director to convert to talkies, and

OHAYO: Masahiko Shimazu, Chishu Ryu,
Koji Shida, Kuniko Miyake



Ozu shooting
LATE SPRING.
Father
(Chishu Ryu)
and daughter
(Setsuko Hara)
at Kamakura.



did so most reluctantly at that, the dialogue in Ozu's films is the most interesting in Japanese films. Its strength is the complete naturalness which it achieves without attempting naturalism. Ozu's characters always say what is appropriate to the situation, as if their conversation were stolen directly from life. It could not have been better phrased by anyone and yet the art with which it is said has no suggestion of the "artistic." In fact, many critics judge it by the standards usually reserved for the most serious literature.

Both dialogue and script are a result of Ozu's long-standing collaboration with Kogo Noda, another perfectionist. In practice, Ozu says, "When a writer and director work together things won't come out very well if their physical constitutions are not similar. If one likes to stay up late and the other to go to bed early, a balance can't be struck, and they'll both tire. With Noda and me, we see alike on drinking and staying up and

I think this is a most important matter. On the scenarios we do, of course, the dialogue is written by both of us. Although we don't write down the details of the sets, they are in our minds as one common image. We think alike. It is an amazing thing."

Ozu's attitude toward the films has always been that of a perfectionist, and in everything that he does in films, the parts fit so perfectly that one is never conscious of the virtuosity with which it is done. His pictures are so subtle—the precise opposite, in this sense, of Kurosawa's—that one never thinks to praise the skill with which his effects are achieved.

Some of Ozu's most memorable effects are those most apparently simple. In *Late Spring* there is a remarkable sequence, about three minutes long, where Setsuko Hara and Chishu Ryu, as daughter and father, watch a Noh performance. They do not move; neither does the camera; and the scene is intensely affecting, simply because of the carefully

contrived context surrounding it. At the other extreme there is an uproariously funny scene in *Early Spring* where the office workers are playing *mah-jongg* and where the humor consists entirely in what is being said (usually in complete contrast to the facial expressions of the actors) and the way in which it is delivered: it is like a ballet, with the sentences moving. A preordained pattern has been placed upon the dialogue yet, at the same time, what the characters are saying is utterly natural, and because of the way they say it, extremely funny.

The end effect of an Ozu film—and one of the reasons why he is thought of as spokesman—is a kind of resigned sadness, a calm and knowing serenity which prevails despite the uncertainty of life and the things of this world. It is an attribute of the good Buddhist who looks at the world from a distance and is uninvolved. The Japanese call this quality, which is essentially the traditional Japanese aesthetic spirit, *mono no aware*, for which Tamako Niwa has given the inspired translation: “sympathetic sadness.”

One usually sees the effect upon the father, though the other members of the family are certainly not immune to it. Still, Japan is a

patriarchy (and Ozu always put himself into his own films) and it is the father we remember longest because his realization of *mono no aware* usually forms the coda and conclusion of an Ozu film.

In *Tokyo Story*, after the wife has died and the children left, the father bids farewell to the daughter-in-law (the only member of the family who was at all nice to the older people) and then, slowly, turns around and enters the empty house. In *Tokyo Twilight* there is a long final scene in which the father, alone in the house, his daughter dead, his wife gone, sits and looks straight ahead of him. In *Equinox Flower* there is a lovely final scene where the father, in the train, is going to make up with his daughter, who has married without his permission. He is happy, he hums a song and looks out of the window and the sense of *mono no aware* never hit the spectator harder. Finally—and perhaps the best of these sad apotheoses of the father—is the final scene of *Late Spring*. The daughter has gone, finally married, and the father is left alone. In the final scene, he takes a pear from the table and begins to peel it. There is a close-up of his hands performing this simple duty while he, almost unknowing, looks straight ahead, then down to the business at hand.

Critics have often pointed out that this final figure is actually Ozu himself; that he, like his heroes, is a man who delights in Japanese arts, is a connoisseur of them, and who adores the simplicities of life. They maintain that it is Ozu himself who is the father in *Late Spring*, the old man in *Early Summer* (Bakushu, 1951), the bereft father (Ozu is unmarried) in *Tokyo Twilight*.

Whatever value these observations may have, they do point to an origin for all the



A script reading during shooting of TOKYO TWILIGHT. Ineko Arima, Setsuko Hara, Ozu.

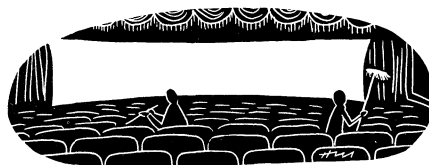
later Ozu films. They are much influenced by a literary form called the *shishosetsu*, the semi-autobiographical novel, and by the work of Naoya Shiga, a man specializing in this form. (Though this form is exceedingly prevalent in Japan, many critics foreign and otherwise have singled out the *shishosetsu* as the single thing most wrong with Japanese literature.) These works, and particularly the work of Shiga, have what the critic Taihei Imamura has called "a Japanese attitude in that the observer tries to recall a phenomenon instead of analytically reconstructing it."

This very Japaneseness of Ozu's approach, intuitive rather than analytic, the emphasis upon effect rather than cause, emotive rather than intellectual, is what—coupled with his marvelous metamorphosis of the Japanese aesthetic into images visible on film—makes him the most Japanese of all directors.

Yet, oddly, this has had the effect of keeping his films off the international market, the

Japanese themselves being afraid that his excellence will not be recognized. And in true Japanese fashion, they prefer not to try rather than to fail. Despite the success of *Tokyo Story* in Los Angeles and London, and of *Tokyo Twilight* in New York, they have, until recently, preferred to ignore it, one of the canons of the Japanese business world being that the West cannot hope to appreciate anything "truly Japanese," which is—of course—merely another facet of the country's extreme consciousness of its own special Japanese quality.

However, since the outstanding success in Japan of both *Equinox Flower* and *Good Morning* there have been signs of Japanese interest in letting the films of Yasujiro Ozu be shown abroad. And this is as it should be. He is one of the few senior directors of Japan to remain unknown while others of his generation—Gosho and Mizoguchi—have achieved foreign acclaim.



New Periodicals

Studies in Public Communication, available from the Department of Sociology, University of Chicago, Chicago 37, Illinois (\$1.00), has joined the *Public Opinion Quarterly* as a journal dealing with the mass media from a social-science standpoint. In the current (second) issue, the editor notes the potentialities of such studies. Although the contents of the issue suf-

fer from the intolerably dull writing almost universal among social scientists, they have many important implications. Kenneth P. Adler, in the only article specifically related to film, reports a comparative study of the patrons of a conventional theater and an art house in Chicago, with useful suggestions for any theater manager considering changing to an art-house policy—a change that has become encouragingly common in certain types of communities.